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## Latest Budget Victim: Adult Education

Cuts to literacy, computer classes gut an economic springboard for low-income Californians

By: [Jennifer Gollan](#)

Facing staggering cuts tied to the state budget deficit, a growing number local school districts and community colleges are focusing precious resources on K-12 and undergraduate education at the expense of adult-education classes, eviscerating a key economic springboard for low-income Californians.

The cuts for the coming school year will likely affect everyone from seniors hoping to learn new computer skills in the San Jose Unified School District to English learners in the Oakland Unified School District and at City College of San Francisco.

School administrators say the state's \$15.4 billion budget deficit and uncertainties tied to the highly politicized parrying over tax extensions have left them no choice. But adult educators say the cuts will only exacerbate California's dismal literacy rate, overcrowded prisons and other intractable problems. As it is, 23 percent of adults lack basic literacy skills in California, according the National Center for Educational Statistics.

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"We have a great need in California for adult education," said Mike Wada, president of California Council for Adult Education, an advocacy organization that represents nearly 3,000 adult educators statewide, with offices in Huntington Beach. "This, in essence, dooms people to a life of poverty because they won't have things like basic math and English skills."

For many, adult-education courses offer an inroad to a better job, earning power and social mobility. The result is a skilled, fluent population that boosts the state's broader economy and cuts down on crime.

But state budget cuts have created a new imperative — one that resonates with a philosophy long invoked by educators across the state: getting back to basics. School administrators say with shrinking resources, they must concentrate on K-12 students over adults.

For school districts, the shift is also tied to a decision by the state Legislature in February 2009 to relax restrictions on how school boards use state funding for certain programs, including classes for gifted children and training programs in carpentry and other blue-collar fields. Three out of four school districts statewide have reported making cuts to adult education since the state lifted its restrictions, according to [a survey by the state Legislative Analyst's Office](#) released in February.

The Oakland Unified School District hopes to save \$8.8 million next year by laying off 46 adult-education teachers. Most vocational programs would be cut, along with citizenship preparation classes and English as a second language courses. Literacy courses and General Education Development, or GED, classes would be shifted from a separate adult-education program to the district's high schools and College and Career Readiness Office. Board members expect to make a final decision by June 29.

“It is hard to say how many classes we will be able to offer, and how many students will be affected,” said Chris Nelson, assistant director for the Oakland district's Oakland Adult and Career Education, which offers classes to 3,000 students. “If adult education goes away, the students that we have been serving will go underground. If a person is not employable, they become a burden to us as taxpayers. They will either get into the criminal justice system or go on welfare.”

Similarly deep cuts are in store in the San Jose Unified School District. In July, the district intends to shift \$3.5 million in state funding away from some adult-education programs to academic support for low-achieving students in grades K-12. As a result, there will no courses for seniors, and classes for students learning English, earning their GED or preparing for a career in nursing or accounting will be significantly reduced.

“It is our core mission to support K-12 education,” said Karen Fuqua, a spokeswoman for the San Jose Unified School District, which serves 32,000 students in grades K-12. “Because of the state’s draconian cuts, we had to find dollars to support core tutorial programs like Saturday classes and summer programs for K-12 students.”

Community colleges are also not immune. City College of San Francisco, for example, is scrambling to offset a cut of at least \$8.5 million from the state. As a result, it intends to cut roughly 700 classes over the next school year, many of them for adults. Enrollment in these adult programs — including English as second language and computer classes — will likely grow more competitive.

“We always are deeply concerned for the communities we serve when we are forced to reduce access,” said Peter Goldstein, the college’s vice chancellor of finance and administration. “But the state budget cuts have taken so much money away from our college that we have no choice.”